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ABSTRACT

A writing lab director's rationale for the development and use of a tutors' handbook emphasizes its function as a time-saver for all those involved in the lab and as a morale builder for the tutors. The handbook relates information about the paperwork involved in the lab and about the definition, purpose, and advantages of tutoring. Other benefits derived from use of the handbook include specifying goals for tutors and giving them a sense of security. The handbook is introduced at an initial orientation period, freeing later orientation time for reviewing resource materials and discussing negative student attitudes. The long-range effectiveness of the handbook cannot yet be gauged, but it appears to be more effective than a series of individual handout sheets and has been enthusiastically received by the tutoring staff. (AEA)

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Phyllis Shackett

The Tutoring Experience--The Use of a Handbook With Writing Lab Tutors

John Bruce Cantrell in the tutors' handbook that he uses in the Writing Lab at the University of South Carolina sums up my attitude about what a tutors' handbook should be like and what the handbook should do. "Writing and teaching involve reaching out of ourselves to play on the strings--the thoughts and feelings--of others human beings to whom it is our first responsibility to be honest, sincere, encouraging, and supportive." With my handbook, The Tutoring Experience, I intend to reach out to the tutors, and I intend to be as honest, sincere, encouraging, and supportive of the tutors as I possibly can be.

Why use a handbook? Normally, that is the first question that is asked. The primary reason why I chose to use one is based on a central concept in educational circles. Basically, I am a student-oriented instructor, and the Writing Lab is a student-oriented service. As a result, when the tutors, who are students, said they needed a handbook, I responded and compiled The Tutoring Experience.

Secondly, a handbook is a time-saver for the tutors, the students, and the Writing Lab Director. At this time, our university, Northeast Missouri State University, does not have a class for training tutors to conduct one-one-one tutoring sessions. All training is done on a limited time schedule. Orientation periods are hard to schedule because I have three different sets of tutors, and none of their class-schedules or free-time schedules match. I have nine Methods tutors who are working in the Writing Lab as partial fulfillment of their

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educational Methods-course-grade; I have eighteen hired undergraduate tutors; I have one hired graduate tutor; and I have three Graduate Teaching Assistants. Since their schedules do not match, few orientation sessions can be arranged. Those I am able to set up are either at 7:30 A.M. or at 4:30 P.M. However, many of my tutors live off campus and have families; therefore, those times are not convenient either. At other times, they are either in classes or in sessions with their students. As a result, the orientation periods I do have are devoted to explanations of and explorations of more important concepts--evaluation of papers, creation of assignments that are constructive and interesting, and ways to combat negative student-attitudes--instead of spending time relating basic information. The handbook relates information about the paperwork involved in the Lab, why we use tutoring, what tutoring is, and what the advantages of tutoring are for the student and the tutor.

Thirdly, I aim for the handbook to be helpful, encouraging, honest, and supportive of the tutors. By anticipating questions tutors might have and by answering those questions about why we use tutoring, I am showing the tutor that the Lab understands that questions are a normal reaction to any new class or position. This in itself is a time-saver for the Director because then I don't have to answer the same questions thirty different times.

By explaining the doubts that I feel the tutors may be experiencing, I am being encouraging. I understand those doubts because I had them when I first took a position as a Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Writing Lab at Northeast Missouri State University. At that time, I was scared stiff, and I thought that I had a monopoly on doubts. When I discovered that my fellow Graduate Teaching Assistants and the Methods tutors were having the same doubts, then I was relieved. However, before I was brave enough to ask my fellow tutors if they had doubts, I lived in mortal fear of discovery and

failure. It is for that reason that I want to reassure the tutors ahead of time that those doubts are normal. Then they can use their energies for work instead of for worry. After the tutors have been reassured that those doubts are normal, I try to explain to them that those same doubts have been and are experienced by most of us in the teaching field.

By presenting explanations about why tutoring is important and why all of the paperwork is necessary, the handbook is exhibiting an honest view. As a student and as a worker, I always question, either silently or vocally, why a procedure is important or why paperwork is necessary. Therefore, it seems logical to assume that others have the same questions especially when one considers that ultimately schools and colleges are attempting to develop thinking, questioning people. I have always expected honest answers, so I attempt to provide the same types of answers for my tutors. By providing those answers, I am treating my tutors as thinking adults. I am also teaching them by example. If I am honest with them, then they in turn will be as honest as possible with their students and will provide those students with complete explanations and answers about the Lab and about English. Providing attainable objectives--the improvement of writing skills and the improvement of students' ability to handle the writing process easily--is another aspect of honesty. Those two objectives appear to be within most students' grasps; therefore, those objectives seem honest and genuine.

The handbook is also supportive of the tutors. Many tutors, students, and teachers need something concrete in their hands for security while they are in the classroom. Therefore, the handbook functions much like Linus' security blanket functions. Professionals in various fields use different forms of security--speakers use notecards, athletes use chewing tobacco, and

students chew on pencils. Because most of us don't have photographic memories, we can't just depend on remembering what we hear in orientation sessions or depend on the notes we hurriedly scribble during those sessions. Sometimes we miss something, or we forget something. So do the tutors. In order to avoid panic, the handbook provides answers that are available in the morning, in the afternoon, and at midnight.

Not only does the handbook give the tutors a sense of security, it also provides those answers immediately. I am not availabe to answer their questions after 4:30 P.M. or before 7:30 A.M., and unfortunately, none of us can regulate our questions so that they appear only when someone is available to answer them. Many of one's most disturbing questions perturb the mind at 1:00 A.M. or at 5:30 P.M. If the handbook is available, then the tutors can have immediate answers; they don't have to worry about the questions. Many of those disturbing questions can be answered by the tutors themselves, which again is one of the ultimate aims of education.

If tutors forget how to do a procedure like make a biweekly report, then they don't have to run to the Director to find out how to write one. Tutors merely have to turn to the appropriate explanation or examples in the handbook to find the answers. Again, time is saved. I believe this is a very important aspect of the handbook, for I'd rather have the tutors expending energies creating new activities instead of expending energies running back and forth to see how something is done. Also, if tutors get frustrated by a procedure or by the paperwork, they can refresh their memories about the reasons why the procedure and the paperwork are important.

Since being prepared is the key to good teaching and tutoring, the handbook is supportive because it shows tutors how to organize lesson plans and how to

provide long range plans and contracts for the students. Tutors become aware of the fact that careful preparation provides for smoother more constructive sessions. The handbook also takes tutors through a session. As a result, the tutors may be more relaxed, and they may know more about what to expect from their students and more about what is expected of the tutors.

By using the handbook, I only have to spend a short time introducing the Lab to the tutors. I briefly review the material in the handbook when I meet individually with each tutor, a practice I do every two weeks. Valuable orientation time is spent in learning how to evaluate papers and learning how to identify writing problems. During orientations I have the tutors evaluate a paper, then we go over the paper as a group and compare comments. We discuss what is wrong with the paper, mechanically and stylistically; what to tell the person who wrote it because a wrong phrase can damage the student's attitude and self-concept, where to begin to correct the paper, and what types of activities to use with the writer. We also discuss different types of students that the Lab handles, for we have various types of students referred to us for help: foreign students, educationally disadvantaged students who have A.C.T. scores in English of fifteen and below, students from English Composition classes, and students from other departments and classes on campus. Some students have basic grammar, organization, and development of ideas problems; others need help refining their skills and style. We also discuss materials that are available for use in the Lab. We have a file of grammar exercises and handouts, video-taped grammar series which is like an adult Seasame Street, English Composition books, and Edu-culture tapes and booklets. During the discussion about materials, I also explain the various types of diagnostic exams we have to use with the students. After the students and materials have been discussed, we devote time to the exploration of the various

types of writing and grammar activities that tutors can design for their students because what works for one student, may not work for another. Tutors need a variety of routes available to them for reaching their students' objectives. I feel that the orientations are more profitable when sepent discussing these concepts because interaction and a free exchange of ideas are needed in order to show the tutors the full range of variety that is available. Tutors get ideas from each other. They learn that they have valuable information to share with each other. They learn that it is not always important to create new assignments, but that it is important to revamp an activity, so that it meets a particuliar student's needs, interests, and ability.

Normally, we also spend time discussing attitudes that interfere with tutors' performance and students' writing ability. Handling those attitude problems is difficult and tricky. Tutors need to be aware of the fact that students don't improve if they have an attitude problem. Tutors also must be aware that not everyone likes English and writing and not everyone views English and writing as necessary toools for survival in the world of work. As a result, tutors often spend time doing affective work with their students. They spend time discussing the importance of writing and reassuring students that no one feels that they are dumb just because they have been referred to the Writing Lab. I am not trying to say that all problems are solved by talking, but often tutors and students can come to a working agreement by talking about problems. Then the students are able to receive as much constructive help as possible. Many do overcome attitude problems and develop competent, coherent writing styles.

Gauging the effectiveness of the handbook is difficult because it wasn't implemented until the fall semester 1979. As the Director, I see that the Lab does run smoother, and the students and tutors seem to be more at ease with each other. I witness a growing self-confidence in the tutors. I also

witness improvement in the students' papers. Frankly, I feel that the handbook has been more effective than short handouts which crowd all of the necessary information onto two or three pages. Handouts are cold and clinical; however, the handbook with its personal style is warm and communicative. I think that the impact of language, especially in a handbook, creates a positive or a negative attitude on the part of tutors; therefore, I chose a personal approach because I felt it would create a positive attitude in the tutors. Handouts are also easy to lose. Whereas, the handbook is a little harder to lose because students and tutors would normally miss a book, but not a sheet of papers. Since the handbook is ultimately designed for the tutors, then the evaluation of the handbook's effectiveness has to be based on the tutors' opinions of the it. The improvements I see in the Lab may not be contributed to the use of the handbook; however, according to the tutors, they feel more comfortable, more capable, and more communicative because they use the handbook.

When the handbook has been utilized, orientation sessions attended, and tutoring sessions conducted, tutors discover that they have to learn to be as flexible with tutoring and writing as Jonathan Swift in "On Poetry" said that the poet must be with poetry:

> Blot out, correct, insert, refine,
> Enlarge, diminish, interline;
> Be mindful when invention fails
> To scratch your head, and bite
> your nails.

And I might add, call for help from the Lab Director and not feel humiliated because help was needed.